



In Scuffed Converse and Tube Socks by everybreatheverymove

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Summary: A virtual nobody on the high school food chain, Mike Wheeler's world is rocked when new girl El Hopper shows up wearing tube socks and Converse, and her voice is quite possibly the sweetest sound he's ever heard. Only problem is, she's jock bait, and he's seemingly not got a chance in hell with her.

In Scuffed Converse and Tube Socks

It all started with a simple apology he'd spent way too much thinking about.

He'd been casually minding his own business, riffling through his locker, jamming heavy books and AV equipment into the small space - basically just trying to avoid being *shoved* into it when he'd done just that - had his face connect with the door to his locker, his chin catching on the old padlock.

"I'm so sorry!" A sweet voice behind him had cried, and Mike could barely see hands waving around apologetically, one of which had lightly grazed his shoulder and grabbed at his shirt.

Figuring the stranger had just stumbled into him, or been shoved herself and thus stumbled forward into him, he'd waved her off - nothing out of the ordinary there.

But as she - and her delicate, precious, *angelically* soft voice - disappeared into the swarm of high schoolers either making their way to class or to the exit, some in more of a hurry than others, Mike had managed to turn around just in time to catch the briefest glimpse of her.

She was new to the school this year, about a good foot shorter than him, and, while he wasn't sure she was *'in'* with the popular kids, she looked like she could blend right in if she wanted to. Plaid skirts and knee socks and sickly-sweet voices? She definitely looked like a cheerleader sans the uniform.

And so, against his better judgment, Mike kept looking for her. In every class, down every corridor, at every break.

But that (one-sidedly) happy little accident was a week ago and, while the scratch on his chin had recovered in next to no time, Mike's fascination with the girl hadn't - despite the fact that he didn't even know who she was.

He knew she was a junior, like him, because he'd heard some talk in

the locker room before swim practice, and he'd once caught Troy asking the cheer-squad if they knew of any fresh meat he should acquaint himself with.

(Freakin' Troy and his football team full of knuckleheads. Freakin' Troy and the stupid Varsity jacket he probably sleeps in and wraps around girls just before he breaks up with them - breaking their hearts in the process. Freakin' Troy and his goddamn natural sleazebag charm.)

(Freakin' Mike and his freckles and anxiety. Freakin' Mike and his nerdy friends and his complete lack of romantic experience. Freakin' Mike and his pale skin and borderline emo wardrobe.)

"I'm fucked."

"What?" Dustin looks over at his friend, brows knitting, "Why are you fucked?"

"Oh." Mike taps his pencil against his textbook, "I'm just *stuck*."

The curly-haired boy seems to contemplate him for a moment, eyeing him carefully as though he's going to spontaneously combust or blow a fuse or something.

"What?"

"Nothing." Dustin says, holding his hands up defensively, "You've just been acting weird lately."

"No, I haven't." Mike denies, "I'm fine."

"If you say so." His friend starts, "But you've been acting jumpy since we walked in here." He tells Mike, glancing around the library, "Did you, like, piss in someone's football helmet or something? If you did, you can tell me."

"If I did, I wouldn't be worried because it's not like those goons know where the library is in the first place, so how would they even find me?" He reasons, "But, no. No, I didn't *pee* in a helmet."

"Then what?"

"There's..."

Unsure if he should divulge, he takes a deep breath. If questioned, he'd probably consider Dustin to be his closest friend, so, really, what's the harm?

"There's a girl."

"You got a girlfriend?" Dustin exclaims, slamming his palms flat against the desk, "Dude, you told me you'd be last!"

"What? No." Mike shakes his head with a scoff, "No, I just... I don't *know* her but-"

"So you've got a crush on someone?" Dustin tries again, eyes wide, "Do I know her?"

"No, and no one does. That's the problem." He says with a sigh, "Maybe she's not even real. Maybe I'm just going crazy." He bites on his pencil, reaches back to scratch at the nape of his neck.

"Just ask around."

"No thanks." Mike's face flushes in mild embarrassment, "You think I wanna get caught asking people if they know a girl who's way out of my league? There are a hundred in this school alone, Dustin." He snorts, "I'd rather *die*."

Dustin tosses his hands up again, in disbelief this time, "If she's out of your league then you're probably better off just getting over her." The brown-haired boy squints, "And it's not like you'll be getting *over* her anyway, so-" He whines when Mike reaches over to punch his arm, "Dick!"

"Don't tell the others."

"Fine."

"Good."

"Consider her forgotten."

"Where's Will?"

"Doctor's appointment." The other three reply in unison, chomping down on french fries and hotdogs.

"Oh." Mike slips into the seat beside Max, glancing around the busy courtyard, "Again?"

"Yeah. He said it was just a checkup though so I wouldn't worry." Lucas informs him, prying a fry from his packet, "Are we still on for the campaign tomorrow?"

Mike nods, swallowing down a bite of his lunch. He pulls at the sleeves of his shirt, the plaid material gathering around his forearms, "All through Saturday."

The boys reach over to high-five then, and Max audibly groans, "Such dorks."

"If we're dorks then you're uninvited."

She presses a hand up to her chest then, "How dare you stab me in the heart so savagely, Michael?"

"Hey," Lucas cuts in, tossing a fry in his girlfriend's face, "You guys see the new girl yet?."

"Specify which one, Sinclair," Dustin shakes his head, "There's like seven new kids this year."

"I don't know her name. She's, like, short...ish. Brunette. Total nerd wet dream."

Max whacks him over the head then, "I'm dumping you."

"Again?" He smirks, then chuckles, "Not *my* wet dream, babe."

Max pulls a face, feigning annoyance, "For the record, I know who you're talking about." She tilts her head in the girls' direction - because apparently she just knew where she was? - and she purses her lips thoughtfully, "She's in bio with me."

"Yeah?" Mike slurps on his soda, the thin straw paused between his lips, "What's her name?"

"I don't remember." The redhead frowns, "She's from Chicago or something. Her mom died so her dad packed up and they moved here. Some sob story." She shrugs, "I think they live on my street but I'm not sure."

"You don't know her name but you memorised her whole life story?"

Max quirks a brow, "You got a crush on her already or something?"

"No, I don't even know her." Mike scowls, teeth baring and the corner of his mouth curling up into a some kind of snarl, "I'm just curious."

"Well, maybe you can tone your curiosity down just a tad because she's walking over here and you're gonna creep her out with your staring."

"What?" The tall boy whips his head around then, the brunette walking past the cafeteria doors into the outside area meeting his eye, as if on queue.

She offers a small smile, almost uncertain, and Mike's pretty sure he's gonna pass out because *there* she is.

(Wow.)

That last glimpse he'd caught of her really hadn't done her justice because- *Jesus!*

(He's a dead man.)

"No way is she coming over here." Dustin denies in a grumbled voice, shaking his head as he steals a french fry from off of Lucas' tray. "It's probably just a dare or something."

"What, we're *such* losers that even the new kids don't wanna hang with us?" Lucas challenges, smacking the back of his friend's hand as he goes to grab another fry. "Hey!"

"I'm just saying, look at her." The curly-haired boy starts, carelessly

waving a hand around as he gestures towards the approaching girl, "It's midday on the fourth week of school, and, objectively, she's pretty attractive. I can guarantee you she's already been hit on by at least three different jocks today." He wiggles his eyebrows smugly.

"That's such bullshit." Max scoffs.

"And she's wearing a short skirt so you know the cheerleaders have *totally* already talked her into trying out."

Mike frowns, "That doesn't mean she's gonna be popular."

"No, but say she's being courted-"

"Courtied? Really?" The redhead across from him snorts, pulling a leg up onto the bench.

"Say she's being courted," Dustin repeats, shooting Max a look, "by the preps, and, before making her mind up about where she wants to be placed in the high school hierarchy, she spends a week with us nerds."

"Do you just assume everyone tests the waters before they end up where they're supposed to?" She air-quotes the last part with a twitch of her brow, "Because, lemme tell you, I never once thought of dabbing in the cheer pool."

"Hush." Dustin reaches across and moves his hand over Max's mouth, cutting her off. "All we'd have to do is mention Star Wars," he turns to Lucas, "or bring up our fortnightly D&D sessions, and she'd be lost to us forever."

Mike drops his soda down onto his lunch tray, "What are you even talking about?"

"You'll see."

"What?" Mike leans over the table, eyeing his friend. His lips part as though he's going to say something more, to annoy him some, but before he can even breathe, Dustin starts mouthing 'dare, dare, dare' and Max is pulling on the back of his shirt to make him sit back down.

"Hey."

At the sound of maybe the softest voice he's ever heard, Mike turns around on the bench to see the girl in question stood behind him, clutching the strap of the leather bag thrown over her shoulder.

"Hi." He squeaks, voice a note higher than usual. He quickly clears his throat to recover, regretfully watching as the smile falls from her face, "Hey."

"Are you Nick?"

"He is." Max butts in, swinging her bent leg over the bench seat, tapping Mike on the knee, "Lanky, nerdy, *Nick* Wheeler. That's who you're after?"

Mike brushes the redhead's hand away, ignoring the way she fakes a gasp, and he stares up at the new girl with wide eyes, completely done for.

(She's pretty. Like, *prettier* than pretty.)

(Like, her hair's naturally curly, all soft crinkles and waves framing her face, with lighter streaks of blonde by her ears. And, like, her eyes are the perfect mixture of honey brown and hazel, and her eyelashes are just so long. And, real talk, she has such a cute little button nose that he doesn't ever want to- Yikes.)

(And, damn his luck, she's wearing a pair of tube socks pulled up to her knees, all white cotton and two pink stripes at the top. Her skirt is like two inches above the knee, and he doesn't think he's ever wanted to touch a piece of woman's clothing so badly. It's pink and grey, plaid and neatly creased, and the way she's tightly tucked a white sweater into the top of it doesn't do much to help his freaking hormones.)

(Totally preppy, but also... The white Converse on her feet are scuffed and scratched, like she's been running through the woods all day, and his nerd brain is on *full* overdrive.)

"I'm Mike." He confirms after a beat, lifting a hand to run it through his hair casually, "You're..."

"El." She nods, and she offers him another slight smile.

(El. El. El.)

"I was, uh, told you were, like, the best in our English Lit class. And I've just joined, and- and someone told me you'd be out here, so..."

Mike can faintly hear Dustin mumbling his annoying '*dare, dare, dare*,' thing from behind him.

"Yeah!" He perks up, suddenly all ears, choosing to ignore the chant coming from across the table, "Yeah, I mean, I am."

"You need a tutor already?" Max asks her, leaning up on her elbows, "Nick's totally your guy."

"Max!"

"I do." The girl relies, looking back and forth between the pair before settling her eyes on Mike's face, "I don't mean to be a bother or anything, but-"

"No. No, it's, uh, fine." He says, blinking twice so quickly his eyes sting, "I'm fine with that."

"I mean, I've only been here for a week and I'm already way behind." She tells him with a soft sigh, her shoulders dropping. With a breath, "It won't be a bother?"

"No." He shakes his head, "Uh, when do you-"

"Whenever." She informs him with a shrug, "It's not like I have much else going on."

Mike nods, "Right, yeah." He says, gnawing at the insides of his cheeks until Max nudges him, shoving his body forward and almost directly into the brunette. She takes a small step back and Mike has a force a smile onto his face, "Tomorrow?"

"Sure." She agrees, "After school?" She sounds so hopeful, so sweet, that Mike's pretty sure he would cancel any plans he'd ever made if he had to.

(He would totally make plans *just* so he could cancel them if it meant he got to hang out with her.)

"Okay. Um, the library?"

El nods, and she moves to tuck her hair behind her ear, ducking her head, "Sweet." She says, biting the right side of her bottom lip, "Thanks."

"Uh, yeah." He pauses, "You're welcome."

With a final look, she pulls on the strap of her backpack and spins around on her Converse, the rubber soles making the gravel below her feet crunch.

As she walks away, and he stares after her like a total lovestruck moron, Mike feels Max punching his arm, her fist repeatedly connecting with his bicep.

"Dude!"

"Ow!"

"You got a date."

"It's a dare, I'm telling you." Dustin mutters, mouth half full of 'dog

"It's not a date." Mike informs them, "And it wasn't a dare."

"Uh, yeah, it was." Dustin reasons, holding up his hand as he swallows his food, "You'll probably show up to the library tomorrow and she'll be there with Troy and his band of boneheads, and they'll be laughing, and you'll be like, *'Oh, no, Dustin was right! I should've listened to him!'*."

"That would be such a crap dare!" Max retorts, pointing a finger at him, "Like, I think if she was gonna mess with him, she totally would have grabbed his junk or something."

"*What?*" Mike pulls a face.

Lucas snorts, "That'd be assault, not a dare."

"Whatever, you get the gist." Max shrugs, and she rolls her eyes, "Maybe she's just attracted to *Nick* and his totally bitchin' freckles." She teases, shit-eating grin plastered on her face.

"Yeah, man, she doesn't even know your name." Lucas points out. "Maybe Dustin's right."

"I thought you were supposed to be on my side?"

"I am, man, but I'm also realistic." Lucas explains, and he leans back, "Just because you don't want to leave high school a virgin-"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"You're telling me you weren't totally gawking at her this morning?" The older boy stiffens a laugh, "Dude, I get it. It's the skirts and the socks, right?"

"No."

(He totally doesn't sell that.)

Max snaps her fingers, "Oh, and you're meeting her in the library." She adds, "That's like the start of a seventies' porno."

Dustin cackles, "Watched a lot of those, have you?"

"You're all disgusting." Mike grimaces, picking up his backpack with one hand and moving to grab his lunch tray in the other. He stands then, eyeing his friends with disdain, "Seriously."

"Oh, Nick!" Max whines, reaching for his arm, "Nick! I mean, Mike!" She sorts, "Mike! Please come back!"

"Go to hell."

"Mike, please come!"

"Bye!"

Time seems to work against him, because the next day passes so

slowly that he's pretty sure it actually starts going in reverse.

Homeroom is a drag, mainly because Will's still at home, off sick, and Max is being her usual pain in the ass self - kicking his chair and pulling his hair and the likes. First period wasn't any better because Dustin stole another pencil and chewed the goddamn end off.

And the rest of his day is a complete bust because he left his chemistry book at home and he had to partner with the grungy guy who always sits at the back and refuses to shower. But then the final bell rings, and everyone pours out into the hallways, and Mike makes his way to the library with such haste that he almost flies.

"Man," Lucas pats him on the back amicably, "It's a shame. I really thought she'd show."

"Why are you here?" Mike shrugs him off, ignoring the chuckle he earns in return, "I don't think recall her needing your help."

"No," the black teen folds his arms over his chest, bunching up the sleeves of his tee, "I just wanted to watch this trainwreck. And remind you that we have plans tonight."

Mike sighs, sending him a look out of the corner of his eye. But his glare falls within seconds when he spots a familiar head of hair down the hallway.

Only, she's talking to Troy. Or, rather, Troy is talking to her and she's the one doing the listening.

(If she were talking to *him*, Mike would do nothing but listen. Ever.)

(God, he's *such* a tool.)

"Should I call her over?" Lucas elbows him with a smirk.

"Just because you have an '*in*' with some of the guys on the *bench* doesn't mean you suddenly get to catcall people."

"I wasn't gonna catcall," he says, "I was gonna whistle."

"Same thing." Mike huffs, leaning back against the wall beside the

library entrance. "What do you think they're talking about?"

"Probably Prom."

"It's not even October."

"Right," Lucas starts, and he copies Mike, resting back against the brick wall. He drops his backpack to his feet, tilts his head as they continue to stare down the hallway, "But guys like Troy like to lock down their dates so they can secure the booty."

"Why do you constantly feel the need to talk like a frat guy?" Mike chuckles, "Dustin, I could maybe understand because of Steve, but-"

"Hey, man, it's not my fault I know slang."

"You know slang because you used the word 'booty'?" He stares at Lucas, "Seriously? That's your excuse for constantly sexualising teenage girls?"

"Don't act like a prude, Wheeler." He warns him, voice monotone and face expressionless, "We all know you've been fantasising about Tube Socks over there."

"You don't know shit."

"You totally did it."

"Whatever," he shrugs, "maybe I did. Doesn't matter."

"For real?"

Before Mike can reply, Lucas has picked up his bag from the floor and flung it over his shoulder, walking backwards down the corridor El is coming from. Troy is nowhere in sight, hopefully having returned home under that bridge he crawled out from.

(Does she plan on *killing* him?)

"*Tube Socks*." Mike spots Lucas mouthing behind the girl, and he scans her up and down quickly, shooting the taller boy a thumbs up.

Mike rolls his eyes, raises his arm to give him to flip his friend off just before El reaches him.

Stopping in front of him, El slides her bag down her arm, holding it by one of the thin straps, "Was that for me?"

"No." Mike's brown eyes blow wide, and he offers a slight grin, blinking, "No. It was just my friend being a prick. I mean, a dick. An ass." He frowns, "A butthead?"

"Butthead?" Her cute nose crinkles and Mike's just about ready to drop dead.

(God, yes, please laugh.)

"I was gonna say knucklehead but it sounded a little *too* retro."

El nods, "Retro can be good," she says with a look down, "kinda like my socks. They'll never get old."

He gulps, and he really, truly hates himself. "They're, uh, nice."

(They're white with green and yellow stripes, and he's pretty sure he shouldn't be turned on by girls in pulled-up tube socks.)

(But then, not all girls look like *this* one.)

"Um," he gestures towards the library, wrapping his palm around the door handle, "should we..."

"Sure thing, Nick."

(Okay, so she doesn't know your name... Minor setback.)